

A comparison of trout and cow in calf by seamus heaney



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The poem "Trout" is a description of a trout's movements through a river. It uses much repeated imagery and similes to achieve this description of the trout. The poem is made up of four stanzas, each of four lines, and then a single isolated line at the end of the poem. The poem has no regular rhyme scheme, however, it does contain one internal rhyme in the third stanza: "Where the water unravels/ over gravel-beds" The rhythm of the poem is irregular; Heaney uses punctuation and enjambment to achieve this irregularity.

At the beginning on the first and fourth stanzas he uses punctuation to isolate the first word of these stanzas, changing the natural rhythm of the poem. I will now examine "Trout" in detail, line by line. Heaney uses two pieces of imagery on the first line: "Hangs, a fat gun-barrel" The word "Hangs" is isolated from the rest of the line by the comma which follows it. This gives us an image of isolation or suspension, this is interesting because the word "Hangs" gives us an image of isolation or suspension.

This use of punctuation helps to change the rhythm of the line, making it irregular. The rest of the line is a metaphor, Heaney is likening the body of a trout to "a fat gun-barrel". This gives us an image of the trout being like a gun, not in just the shape of it, but also the destructive quality that a gun has. "slips like butter down/the throat of the river" This is the first use of a simile in the poem, which Heaney uses regularly in this poem. Heaney is comparing the movement of the Trout through the river to the movement of butter down a throat. The word "slips" contains much sibilance, which makes it sound as if the passage of the trout is smooth, without obstruction.

This image of smoothness is continued in the second stanza, Heaney uses the simile “ smooth-skinned as plums” to describe the movement of the trout. The gun or shooting image used at the beginning of the poem is reused in the next line:” his muzzle gets the bull’s eye” The word “ muzzle” is ambiguous, it is calling the trout’s mouth a “ muzzle” this is the name for a mouth of an animal, or the mouth of a gun, which revives the shooting image. The shooting image is reused in the second half of the line, a “ bull’s eye” is the centre of a target used in shooting, this gives us the image that the trout is literally being shot at the “ grass-seed and moths”. This makes the trout seem very destructive, which is reinforced in the last line of the stanza, the grass-seed and moths picked of by the trout are said to be “ torpedoed”, this is relating the trout to a submarine – something that inhabits water and is destructive.” Where water unravels/over gravel-beds” This is a description of some white water rapids, the use of the internal rhyme and the onomatopoeic quality of the words make this very effective.

“ he/ is fired from the shadows” This continues the gun/destructive images used throughout the poem but also the “ torpedo” image used at the end of the second stanza. The trout “ is fired” making the trout seem passive, and is being “ fired” by something else – like a torpedo and a submarine. The fourth and final stanza uses much of the same poetic devices and imagery as the rest of the poem.” flat; darts like a tracer-/bullet” This uses punctuation in a similar way as in the first line of the poem, punctuation is used to isolate the first word from the rest of the line, this also breaks up the natural rhythm.” darts like a” This is another simile, it is saying that the trout darts,

or moves around the water like a “tracer-bullet”. The trout is being compared to a “tracer-bullet”, something again, that is destructive.

“A volley of cold blood” The word volley is being used in a destructive context, you will often use the word “volley” to describe say a “volley of arrows” or a “volley of bullets”, but it is being used to describe the trout which makes the trout seem very destructive. The term “cold blood” is ambiguous - it has two meanings. The trout is a cold blooded animal, but it is also killing in “cold blood” which means that it is killing perhaps maliciously or cruelly. The poem ends with a single, isolated line:” ramrodding the current.

“The word “ramrodding” has a certain historical context. It usually refers to using a “ramrod” to force a charge down a firearm. Since the act of “ramrodding” occurred mainly a long time ago it could be that the actions of the trout described in this poem have also been going on for a long time. This carries on with the destructive and firearm images used throughout the poem.

I will now examine the poem “Cow in Calf” by Seamus Heaney, and compare it to the poem “Trout”. The title “Cow in Calf” tells us that the poem is about a pregnant cow. The title is simple, and like “Trout” it tells us simply what the subject of the poem is. The poem consists of three stanzas, all of irregular length, this is different to “Trout” which has four stanzas each four lines long.

There is no rhyme scheme in this poem. The rhythm is irregular although

Heaney uses repetition on a number of occasions to give the poem an almost
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rhythmic quality. The natural rhythm is broken up by many uses of enjambment and punctuation, similar to the use of punctuation and enjambment in “Trout”. I will now examine “Cow in Calf” in detail, line by line.

There are two similes in the first stanza: “It seems she has swallowed a barrel” “her belly is slung like a hammock” Heaney uses these similes to describe the state the cow is in – pregnancy. This is very similar to Heaney’s use of similes to describe the movement of the trout in “Trout”. Heaney uses another simile at the beginning of the second stanza to describe trying to get the cow to move out of the cow house or “byre”: “like slapping/a great bag of seed” This tells us that the skin of the cow has perhaps become rougher as a result of her pregnancy. Heaney uses repetition on two occasions in the second stanza. He repeats the word “slapping” on the first line.

This gives us the image that the cow is not moving where he wants, and he is having to repeat the action of “slapping” her to get her to move. This is in fact what he is having to do, because in the fourth line we see the other use of repetition. He is forced to “hit her again and again”. He uses the repetition of the word “again” and alliteration on the word “again and again” to make the action seem very rhythmic. This repetition and rhythm is very different to “Trout”.

In “Trout” there is no use of repetition, and the rhythm is altered very much by Heaney’s use of punctuation. The end of the second stanza is rather onomatopoeic. He uses words such as “plump”, “depth” and “far”, which

sound deep, giving the impression of incredible depth – due to the cow's pregnancy. This is similar to the poem "Trout", where Heaney uses onomatopoeic words to describe some white water rapids. The third and final stanza of the poem is a summation of the cow's life. The first part of this stanza is a slightly humorous description of the cow's mooing.

The sound is described as a monotonous "drone". Heaney may be attempting to convey that the cow's life is monotonous, or repetitive. The last two lines are an even briefer summation of the cow's life: "Her cud and her milk, her heats and her calves/keep coming and going" Her life is a continuous cycle, of producing milk, and of pregnancy. This summation is very different to the rest of the poem. The rest of the poem has an abundance of similes and imagery, this is absent from the ending, it is a brief, simple summation of the cow's life. The ending is similar to the ending in the poem "Trout".

"Trout" finishes with a single isolated line, which is very different to the rest of the poem, the ending of "Cow in Calf", although it is not so separated from the rest of the poem; is very different to the body of the poem. I conclude, that these two poems by Seamus Heaney, are very similar, they are both poems of the natural world, and use many of the same poetic devices. However, I think that "Trout" is the more effective of these two poems, because it has a lot of very clear, repeated imagery.